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ABSTRACT

Problems for the biographical researcher in conducting oral interviews with primary sources are discussed. Successful biographical research using oral history must be thorough and honest. A major problem in getting candid information from primary subjects may occur if quotations touch upon areas considered personal or controversial. Other problems concern the reaction of subjects to tape recorders, gaining the trust of subjects, getting too close to the subjects to maintain objectivity, and keeping records of interviews. The research method must be adapted to the personality of the subject. For instance, some personalities change when a microphone appears before them. Also, voluminous note-taking or tape recording may be hampered considerably if the subject is a "put on" artist who delights in weaving intricate narratives. Another problem concerns the researcher's reporting correctly the language of the conversation, especially over a long period of time. This problem corresponds to that of the accuracy of the recollector's quotations of past conversations. Because of these inaccuracies, it is wise to get at least two accounts of an event. Family or personal opposition to the project and determining who is really an authority in a given case are other problems. Finally, the researcher must constantly assess his objectivity by questioning whether he is showing bias toward either side of a controversial issue, if he is justified in doing so, if the other side is represented, and if the subject should be abandoned. (Author/RM)

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# SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE PROBLEMS OF ORAL BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH

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While this paper is essentially concerned with problems of using oral history techniques in biographical research, it will also consider some of the problems of what Max Lerner has termed "hot history,"[1] and also the problems which can come from materials gained in interviews. Oral history research methods can lend themselves admirably to the area of biographical research, however.

The crux of successful biographical research using the methods of oral history is to gain candid, thorough interviewing reactions from the subjects of the interviews. The oral material must be thorough, and it must be honest. To gain less is to find yourself with far more research problems than originally anticipated. Perhaps overlong answers seem nice, but they too require extra work, at least in respect to checking the accuracy of details.

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As E.H. Carr observed, "History cannot be written unless the historian can achieve some kind of contact with the mind of those about whom he is writing."[2] While the writings of and about an individual may yield much useful information, such sources often have been "purified," so to speak, for the public consumption. The true person may not appear

exacept by accident, for people are frequently less candid in their public statements and actions. An example is the public President Nixon and the Nixon who so startled the public by contrast when he appeared on his home tape recordings. Through the aid of oral history research methods, our chances of breaking through to the reality of the character are enhanced.

We are particularly concerned with getting information which is candid from our primary subject. This may be only a minor problem with your "supporting characters," but if the problem exists with the subject of the study, the problem is a major one. This may be the case if some of your questions touch upon areas considered personal or controversial (especially areas of social taboo, such as divorce before 1920).

If none of the subjects of the interviews seems inclined to provide much information, the researcher may have to resort to more deduction than expected. The process is essentially the same as detective work, for the researcher may be seeking information which others prefer to conceal. (Indeed, Robin W. Winks has compiled a book of essays on evidence which he titled The Historian as Detective.[3]) As the information comes in, the researcher makes deductions regarding possible answers to questions, based on the answers found or suspected to that time. He will form his own ideas as to what happened, then try to find hard evidence, preferably in written sources or in corroborating statements, to disprove or maintain these suppositions, at least so much as is possible. As Carr put it,

> As any working historian knows, if he stops to reflect what he is doing as he thinks and writes, the historian is engaged on a continuous process of moulding his facts to his interpretation and his interpretation to his facts. It is impossible to assign primacy to one over the other.[4]

If the information remains incomplete, your written comments in this area may be a composite of what is known, combined with a bit of conjecture, noted as such, concerning the "maybe"s of the case.

Some of the problems encountered in orally researching a biography are:

1. The reaction of the subjects to tape recorders,
2. Gaining the trust of the subjects,
3. Getting too close to the subjects to maintain objectivity, and
4. Keeping records of the interviews.

The typical person is not accustomed to having his or her voice or picture recorded, as a celebrity might be. For this reason many persons will tend to "freeze," either acting or speaking unnaturally when the camera or tape recorder is present. Some subjects become very careful of their exact words whenever a tape recorder appears. Their trust in the researcher may not affect this. They simply will be very self-conscious of what they say for the tape recorder, acting almost as if they are making a formal address.

Three options are available in this case: (1) you can work at putting them at ease until they are responding naturally; (2) you can hide the tape recorder, so they will not be conscious of it; or (3) you can

dispense with the recorder. Some subjects may never relax, making the first option less usable. The second option, hiding the recorder, would violate any sense of trust developed by the subject in the researcher, automatically eliminating that choice. The third option, no tape recorder, leaves a far less thorough and exact record of what transpires in the interviews. This poses a dilemma: Are we violating a sacred researcher's obligation by failing to record? Obviously such a failure will eliminate the record which is the most valued part of oral history: having broad, first-hand evidence available for later historians. Is the tape so important that an artificial, perhaps very slanted (to the side of caution) result is more important than a more candid reaction?

Your options may be limited by the personality of your subject. You must get to know and understand the personality of your subject as soon as possible. Some personalities change when a microphone appears before them. The tape recorder introduces a formality which casts some doubt upon the ultimate value of the material which it would provide. Some people do not lend themselves to more traditional scholarship, for their habits are far less structured than might be expected in highly successful people. The research method has to be adapted to the personality. One method which may be used to record the material is handwritten notes. The interviews with the subject might also be informal in structure. When the subject is most relaxed, he will be most candid.

Voluminous note-taking or tape-recording may be hampered considerably if the subject is a "put-on" artist. Some people delight in

giving false leads or in weaving very intricate narratives quite likely to prove totally spurious. This can provide much material which may be totally misinterpreted on tape, and which will not be much easier to detect in videotaped interviews. A person who will serve roast goat to visiting professors and pass it off as venison (as my subject once did) is hard to trust to the objective, but not very discriminating, tape recorder.

Throughout the research procedure a regular process can be followed. When questions have arisen or general information in an area or clues in a direction are needed, the researcher can go to see the subject. These meetings might be very informal. Many brief, informal meetings may be much easier to arrange than a few long, formal interviews. The subject is also more likely to agree to them. The end result will be more interviewing time and more cleared-up questions. Again, this will depend largely upon the personality of your subject.

At an informal interview several questions can be asked and the answers recorded. You might ask if the subject knows of any persons or sources which might substantiate his statements. You can then spend your time tracking down correlated materials which either will or will not verify his statements. If there are conflicts in information or in the materials discovered, you can return to ask further questions or to get other suggestions for sources.

John A. Garraty has quoted James Anthony Froude as suggesting that "to report correctly the language of conversations, especially when extended over a wide period, is almost an impossibility. The listener,

in spite of himself, adds something of his own in colour, form, or substance."[5] We can avoid this problem to some degree by tape recording, but if we use extensive notes as a substitute for aural recordings, we open ourselves to this potential criticism. However, while we are concerned with the accuracy of our reproduction of statements, we may overlook a more significant problem.

While studying the problem of interviewing subjects who were involved in important events, Garraty pointed out that recording their recollections on tape "touches on only part of the interviewing problem--the accuracy of the recollector's quotations of past conversations remains in doubt."[6] The recall of old conversation is only the tip of the iceberg for this problem, for this is the crux of the historian's problem, whether using oral history techniques or not:

how accurate is the accumulated data? As Winks observed of inference, it "is notoriously unreliable, as are eyewitnesses, memories of old men, judgments of mothers about first children, letters written for publication, and garbage collectors."[7] If we are not careful, we may forget the question of the accuracy of the subject's memory of what was said and done.

A clear example of the type of problem which may occur was the television program which dramatized the relationship and conflict between President Harry Truman and General Douglas MacArthur, leading up to MacArthur's firing by Truman. Some scenes depicting Truman's anger at an apparent affront by MacArthur when they met at Wake Island were controversial because of one particular problem: The scene was based upon Truman's later recollections, and most available hard evidence lends no credence to his memory in this case. This is not to say that Truman was lying; we simply must realize that the human memory is very fallible and is complicated by personal bias.

The increasing use of oral historical research is forcing us to face this problem of the frailties of human memory, especially when the recollection takes place years after the occurrences being investigated. We have seen the problem in many of the memoirs of generals and politicians: The works suffer from bias complicated by hindsight. The tendency to include the punchline which we thought of too late for original use is irresistable. Though this criticism has been made of

Truman's recollections, it is not an uncommon problem: The subject so strongly wishes that something had happened that he begins to believe that it did happen. Truman would write harsh, rebuking letters, then refrain from sending them. In later years he would remember them as actually having been sent. Supposedly President Nixon was using his oral history collection techniques on his office activities to prevent this weakness when he wrote his memoirs. It must be said in his defense that it was a wise move on his part, for his memory of his activities seems to have had many gaps.

Because of these inaccuracies, willed or otherwise, we try to get at least two accounts of an event, for as Barzun and Graff point out, "a single witness may be quite accurate, but two witnesses, if independent, increase the chances of eliminating human fallibility."[8] An excellent example of the use (and problems) of this procedure in controversial circumstances is the recent work by the reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein in their book on the closing moments of the Nixon administration, The Final Days. They repeatedly stated that they included no incidents for which they had only one account or source. There were some catches to the primacy of those accounts, however, a prominent example being the celebrated prayer scene with Nixon and Kissinger, a scene which aroused the ire of many people. The reporters had several similar accounts of the meeting, but who gave the accounts? Only two people were actually there, and therefore privy to what

occurred. Perhaps Kissinger did talk off the record to the reporters, but I have a few personal doubts that Nixon was the second source. While there may have been two or more accounts, they were second- or third-hand, and very likely biased toward Kissinger. Also, Lerner commented

> But the self-interest of many of the sources--their public face, their desire to rid themselves of the Watergate taint and get a better role in the drama of history-- seems to me an insurmountable obstacle, unless the reader knows who the sources are and can make his own assessment of them.[9]

As we are aware, Woodward and Bernstein do not cite their sources.

Just as Woodward and Bernstein had problems of enough sources to assume accuracy as reporters, so have historians run into similar problems. T. Harry Williams, who used oral historical methods to study the life of the politician Huey Long, mentioned the persistent problem of people willing to be interviewed and make candid remarks, but unwilling to be cited. As we get into this type of research, we begin to trod the thin, gray line between good journalism and bad history. While another journalist, James Kilpatrick, was definitely not a sympathizer of the Nixon book, he nonetheless sided with the reporters in their use of sources who would give information, yet deny themselves as a source in public, which obviously creates a dilemma: Should we use the material?

What does the good historian do? Such sources are journalistic proof, but are they also historic proof? Are we justified in referring to "numerous anonymous sources" in historical research? Our problem is perhaps the immediacy of the research: The subject and the sources of information are still around and active. While the subject may still be of interest in another decade or two or three, the sources may be long dead. Should the historian wait, or go ahead and risk harsh criticism for difficult decisions?

This problem is compounded in biography if the subject or the subject's immediate family are still alive. First, it may be too soon to judge the true impact of the individual. On the other hand, by the time the impact can be objectively judged, all sources of information (oral) may be dead and gone, including perhaps the researcher.

A second and perhaps more familiar problem is family or personal opposition to the project. This was a problem of William Manchester's research on the assassination of John F. Kennedy. After gathering much material through the cooperation of the Kennedy family, that support was withdrawn and the family tried to block publication of the book because it did not say what they wanted it to say. People have a great love for the "approved" biography, "approved" being understood as a homogenized, sanitized, vitamin- and mineral-enriched version of the truth which may bear almost no discernable resemblance to the truth itself.

While doing this sort of research we learn to be cautious also in accepting newspaper statements. A front page article in a major newspaper described the birth of my subject and his twin brother, giving the joyful reactions of their father at the state senate meeting, then in session. Unfortunately, for the account to be accurate in all details the state senate would have had to be meeting at two o'clock on Sunday morning, not too common in state legislatures, especially in 1911 when this occured. The process of interviewing and then cross-checking for substantiation or rejection is a continuous one, a scholarly version of a dog chasing his tail around a tree.

Another problem which arises in substantiating facts is determining who (if anyone) is really an authority in a given case. Part of this problem can be shown by considering the subject being asked a sensitive question. Besides the possible accurate answer, three other possibilitiess exist, and they must be considered carefully:

1. He might not really remember the answer;

2. He might remember inaccurately, thinking he is being accurate; and

3. He might not want to remember the answer or even to discuss the question. This last possibility may be the case in controversial or embarrassing personal situations. At all times the researcher must know when to leave well enough alone and follow alternative paths to the truth.

The final paper may also be a bit more informal, if it contains some degree of interpretive writing. This can be in part because the

researcher wants to present the subject and show the subject's views, not necessarily as good or bad views, but clearly as the subject's own opinions, rather than some opinions which the researcher has deduced and attributed to his subject. This necessarily injects some degree of interpretation on the part of the researcher. For these reasons such a study may be more experimental in some respects than more traditional scholarly biographical research. The researcher can only hope that the merits of the resulting biographical study will outweigh the shortcomings which are a part of such methods.

The less formal method of interviewing will be advantageous in getting close to the subject, gaining his trust, and getting information which is both quantitative and qualitative, compared to that made available to persons less well known to the subject. It can give the researcher far more insight into what makes the person work, what he thinks, and how he reacts to the world in general.

There are clear disadvantages, also. The scholarly process is less clearly delineated while following this method. The risks of haphazard scholarship are great. The greatest flaw in the method, perhaps, is the risk of getting too close to the subject and losing one's objectivity. My own study[10] attempted to get as close as possible to presenting the work and thoughts of the subject without losing that objectivity.

As a final point of consideration, the researcher must continually assess his relationship to his subject. Unfortunately, this is not a clear-cut evaluative process. It is, instead, more of a suspicion of

one's motives in attacking or presenting a problem. Problems of objectivity are perhaps more visible in the written product than in the research methodology. Assessing one's objectivity is always a difficult process. The researcher might consider asking such questions as the following ones in an attempt to assess his objectivity:

1. Is this item controversial (could there be two or more sides to it?)

2. If it could be controversial in the above sense, would my version of it be considered either a pro-subject or anti-subject interpretation (am I showing bias toward either side)?

3. If the statement could be considered taking sides, why did I do it? Might it be justified, such as to show the subject's opinion or defense of himself as his opinion, and presented as such, or to show one view of the subject as seen by other people?

4. If the item is presented to show one side's opinion for the reasons given above, is the other side of the question presented also? It should be. If an item takes a stand but gives no supporting rationale as to why it presents only one side, bias is not merely present, but is strong.

5. When should you abandon a subject? When your writing appears to be done by either an apologist or a critic, the time to quit has arrived. Neither point of view is better than the other, for a critic is only an apologist for the "other" side. The researcher should strive to be the person in the middle.

6. Finally, does the paper read like a defense of the man, or an attack upon him? If it does, the title should indicate that it is

a paper of that nature. Few types of research make bias harder to recognize in yourself than oral biographical research, but in many respects few types of research can offer greater personal rewards, for only with a contemporary subject who lives either in reality or in many living memories can the accuracy of your research really be recognized.

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[1]Max Lerner, "Writing 'Hot History,'" Saturday Review, v. 3, #17 (May 29, 1976), 16-19.

[2]Edward Hallet Carr, What Is History? (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961), p. 27.

[3]Robin W. Winks, ed., The Historian as Detective (New York: Harper and Row, 1968).

[4]Carr, pp. 34-35.

[5]John A. Garraty, The Nature of Biography (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), p. 211.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Winks, p. xvi.

[8]Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff, The Modern Researcher, rev. ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1970), p. 147.

[9]Lerner, 16.

[10]William H. Freeman, A Biographical Study of William J. Bowerman, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oregon, 1972.